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Matt Rowan

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Rivals

Abstract

We decided to be rivals, he and I. It was a casual decision, made over tea. Tea is a casual drink. You drink it to feel casual. And in our casual state we felt we could be rivals. "We should be rivals," we said. "So we shall!" we announced.

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November 9, 2012

Rivals

Fiction by Matt Rowan

We decided to be rivals, he and I. It was a casual decision, made over tea. Tea is a casual drink. You drink it to feel casual. And in our casual state we felt we could be rivals. “We should be rivals,” we said. “So we shall!” we announced.

We added to that the modifier “dangerous.” We felt it was important to modify the terms of our rivalry. Casually constructed as it was, it would now be a dangerous rivalry.

Dangerous and also political. We became that: dangerous, political rivals.

Vitriol corroded our previously shared interests.

What I didn’t expect was — in all of our campaigning against one another, taking things out of context and all — that I’d grow to greatly admire the man my rival truly was, as I simultaneously smeared and contrived against the man that I made him out to be. He, doubtless, felt the same, or at least I hoped he did. He, absolutely doubtless, did the same — smeared and contrived against me through the means of his campaign.

Election seasons are times when you, as candidate, attempt to preserve your secrets while simultaneously revealing the worst of your opponent’s. Remove the skeletons. Have them dusted off and ready for the light of day.

The only skeleton in my closet won't surprise you: I had literal skeletons in my closet. I don't know when or why I'd gotten to collecting them, or how. But over the years, I've had so many.

My esteemed rival knew nothing of this growing collection. Few did. I treated the skeletons like Bluebeard treated his secret room, with cagey and sullen aloofness and fair, interest-piquing warning. "Why," I had asked my rival, "would you ever want to know what's in a person's closet? Take mine for instance? Why would you ever want to know what's in there?" He noted my comment was without prompting, at which I grew defensive and shouted that he was never to explore my closet. Over the years, I told everyone, "never explore it."

Many of them explored anyway, and for that they paid dearly. But I can rest easily knowing that my rival never did.

If I dig down deep, I can admit it was one of the reasons for my admiration for him. He knew always where was safe ground to tread and where to leave well enough alone.

As I set to work revealing the metaphorical skeletons of my rival — his problem with lacy garments, his treating everyday like Sunday, his replacing a tooth once for the frivolous reason that it had never suited him — he likewise attempted to reveal my skeletons. It went poorly for him, at first. There were none he could easily identify. I'd never eaten an entire wedding cake, or sailed restricted waters, or bought all the tickets for a particular movie so I wouldn't have to experience the unfortunate behavior of other people. I haven't done those things, and I would never do those things.

I was surprised when he visited me at my home one morning.

"You do not admire me much, do you?" he said.

"Why, no, the opposite is true. I very much admire you," I replied, taken aback.

"You never did. That's why you thought we should be rivals. You thought you could best me. And of course, you have. I could turn up nothing to ruin you."

"That is how these political games of chance go, I suppose. You shouldn't take that to mean I admire you any less."

"Well, I want you to know that I know about your closet. I know your secrets. About the ... skeletons inside."

I'd lost my admiration for him in one instant.

I decried his willfulness to look into my affairs without express permission. In fact he had gotten precisely the opposite. I had expressly prohibited him. And it was clear by the way his expression changed that he had not had the foggiest idea what was in my closet at first, and that he had meant “skeletons” in the usual metaphorical sense, and that it had now become clear that he'd hit on something very literal and very ruinous.

That's how he'd become the elected leader he is today.

And my admiration has not waned.

Matt Rowan lives in Chicago, IL. He's largely responsible for editing *Untoward Magazine* and has a collection, *Why God Why*, forthcoming from Love Symbol Press. You can find more of his stories in places like *Another Chicago Magazine*, *SmokeLong Quarterly* and *Necessary Fiction*, among others.

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